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TAGS: [KPAO](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [SA](#) [SCUL](#)

SUBJECT: SAUDI ARABIA: EDUCATION MINISTRY PLEDGES TO
CONTINUE REMOVING INTOLERANT LANGUAGE FROM TEXTBOOKS

Classified By: DCM Michael Gfoeller for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (S) Summary: Both Education Minister Abdullah Al Obeid and Deputy Minister for Educational Development Dr. Naif Alromi have pledged to continue reforming Saudi textbooks, and pledged specifically to continue removing intolerant language. In meetings taking place over the past three months with EmbOffs, Ministry officials have outlined their programs for massive education upgrades, which include teacher training and development. These efforts are in line with broader Saudi Arabia Government reforms, reflecting King Abdullah's vision of a broader, more tolerant society. We believe the Ministry's willingness to review and improve textbooks is genuine, and their initial efforts are positive indicators of good faith responsiveness on this topic. End summary.

High Level Buy-in to Remove Intolerant Language
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¶2. (S) In a series of meetings to discuss the Ministry's progress in educational reform projects and to raise specific concerns of intolerant language in textbooks, Education Ministry officials at the highest level have pledged they share these same concerns. The Ministry has already acted to reform their textbooks, and has established a mechanism to continually review the textbooks and remove insensitive, intolerant language. Dr. Naif Alromi, the Education Ministry's Deputy Minister of Educational Development, reiterated in a May 31, 2008 meeting with EmbOffs that curriculum reform efforts are ongoing, and that the Ministry remains open to suggestions for improvements, "for the sake of our kids." Alromi, who leads the effort to reform the Ministry's textbooks, noted that "any reform takes time," but immediately followed with a confirmation that the Ministry will "take all accounts under serious consideration." Alromi reiterated the Ministry's fundamental commitment to improve textbooks in this meeting, which echoed Education Minister Abdullah Al Obeid's comments during a meeting with the Ambassador March 25.

Intolerant Language Remains: Ministry's Response
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¶3. (S) Public Affairs Counselor presented Dr. Alromi with a selection of offensive passages from religious textbooks on May 31. These passages were identified during a review conducted by the Embassy Public Affairs Office of the fourth, seventh and eleventh grade religion textbooks. This selected review of elementary, middle, and secondary textbooks confirmed the Ministry's textbooks do continue to include intolerant language against Christians, Jews, polytheists, and non-Sunni Muslims. In some textbooks, it appeared that passages previously identified as intolerant had resurfaced in different pages or had undergone stylistic editing, without substantive changes. Alromi appeared genuinely open to this information, and thanked us for bringing these issues

to his attention. He noted that all updates for the 08-09 curricula have already been made, and the books have already been delivered. Future updates, however, could be included in the 09-10 academic year textbooks. He even invited our input on the galley or prova, manuscripts of the textbooks for next year's edition, when available.

Ministry of Education: Revisions Ongoing

14. (S) Alromi described in the May 31 meeting two committees the Ministry uses to review and approve textbook revisions and updates. An informal committee of advisors he formed assists him directly in the effort, while a formal committee makes final rulings and curriculum updates. Alromi had previously commented during a March 8 meeting with EmbOffs that most intolerant language has been removed from textbooks in recent years. In this meeting he described a process by which all textbooks are reviewed, revised if necessary, and published on an annual basis. While the Public Affairs Counselor drew his attention to one particularly troubling passage, an example on Christianization in the Middle East from an eleventh grade book (Hadith and Islamic Culture-Boys; p. 183-187), the identification of this example led to an invitation for additional feedback, which Public Affairs followed up with the initial review of three grades of textbooks, the results of which were delivered in the May 31 meeting.

E-Textbooks: An Invitation for Improvements

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15. (S) The Saudi Ministry of Education launched on-line versions of its 2007-2008 school textbooks for grades 1-12 in November 2007. (Note: Several SAG websites, including www.ed.edu.sa/HDD/e-books, contain links to the books. Public Affairs used this site for its review described above. End note.) Alromi noted May 31 this action is a deliberate, open invitation for independent groups to identify remaining issues of intolerance in the Saudi textbooks. Minister of Education Abdullah Al Obeid has made similar statements publicly, declaring that the on-line textbooks serve researchers worldwide interested in learning more about the Kingdom's curriculum, in addition to Saudi students and teachers. According to the Ministry, the on-line versions are identical to the hard copies used in all public and private (non-international) schools throughout the Kingdom.

A New Curriculum: Piloted in 40 Ministry Schools

16. (S) The Ministry's on-line textbook project is one of several major educational reform and development programs currently underway. The Ministry introduced a new curriculum in 40 schools in 5 districts across the country in fall 2007. Deputy Minister Alromi told EmbOffs March 8 this new curriculum de-emphasizes memorization and leads students to think critically, analyze, and develop a more global perspective. New emphases include computer skills, English for younger students, art, and physical education (for boys). This new curriculum is being tested in three phases, in grades 1-9. The pilot project is expected to conclude in summer 2010, at which point the Ministry will review the results, make appropriate changes to the curriculum based on feedback from a variety of sources, and potentially implement the new curriculum in all schools throughout the Kingdom. According to Ministry sources, the test pilot textbooks will be posted on-line in the next month or so. To support this broader curriculum reform effort, the Embassy Public Affairs Office developed a special International Visitor Leadership Program for school superintendent and teacher supervisors to focus on curriculum development and implementation, to include gaining teacher support and proprietorship in implementing curriculum changes. This program has been

designed in partnership with Ministry officials and is scheduled for FY08.

King Abdullah: Investing Budget Surplus in Education

17. (S) Saudi Arabia's 2008 budget includes \$28 billion for education and human resources development, including education reforms. The King Abdullah Project for the Development of Public Education -- a six year, \$2.4 billion initiative announced in 2006 -- started early this year. Alromi said March 8 he expects the project to 'change the face' of the Saudi educational system. The project has four main components: teacher training and development; curriculum development (including an emphasis on critical thinking); improving the educational environment through technology (i.e., a computer for every teacher and Smart boards in every classroom); and extracurricular activities (i.e., sports, Islamic studies, and theater). Alromi commented that international consultants would play a major role in the King's initiative, and noted a request for proposals for the overall management of the project had been provided to American companies, and several submitted bids. The SAG is expected to announce its selection soon. Requests for proposal for each of the four pillars of the project are expected to be advertised this summer. When Alromi discussed the removal of intolerant language from textbooks May 31, he placed the Ministry's openness squarely into the context of this much broader initiative, describing it as fully in line with King Abdullah's vision of an inclusive, open, mutually tolerant Saudi society.

Comment: A Good Faith Effort, Continued Engagement Planned

18. (S) Comment: After several months of engagement on this issue, which included an in-house selected review of textbooks, we are encouraged by the Ministry's willingness to openly engage with us on this issue. Ministry officials have repeatedly pledged to review our feedback, make the necessary updates, and even invited us to review textbook manuscripts of future editions. Their transparency in posting the curriculum on-line is another encouraging sign. The Ministry's ongoing, broad educational reform efforts are another positive step. While we are disappointed to find continued occurrences of intolerant language in the textbooks we reviewed, we believe the Ministry's willingness to remove

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intolerant language is a genuine, good faith effort to improve what they recognize is a problem.

19. (S) Comment (con't): Curriculum reform efforts are in line with a high-profile interfaith dialog initiative announced by King Abdullah in an effort to ease religious intolerance and build bridges both within the Islamic sects and towards other faiths. This is a significant step for Saudi Arabia, long known for being insular. We are exploiting this mood shift towards increased tolerance and openness; we plan to continue our active engagement on this topic, including continued work on teacher development, key in gaining widespread acceptance of curriculum reforms. Alromi himself cautioned May 31 that his Ministry can never be sure that all districts are following the curriculum changes, and that the teachers are ultimately responsible for delivering the messages of tolerance and mutual respect. We will continue to identify opportunities for us to engage with the SAG on this point, with both diplomatic engagement and public diplomacy programming tools. End comment.
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